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ABSTRACT

The experience of implementing a writing center in a central Illinois high school created several suggestions for other schools considering such a program. Directors should first consider who would benefit from a writing center and what these benefits would be. They must then prove--to themselves first, and then to the faculty and the administration--that the school situation warrants the creation of a peer tutoring service. Since many high school English departments have barely enough money to cover even the cost of mimeographing or photocopying, the directors must be aware of the bare necessities that a writing center must have in order to function properly. They must be careful not to choose a room with too much space and must also be aware of the danger of signing on too many tutors. The National Honor Society or the counseling department are good places for the director to look for students with English proficiency for tutoring. Directors can use a variety of inducements to encourage students to tutor, including the promise of recommendations for scholarships and extra study time. Finally the idea of using the writing center must be "sold" to the students by means of an inexpensive publicity campaign. (Samples of student record and tutor referral forms are appended.) (HTH)

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STARTING THE HIGH SCHOOL WRITING CENTER

Alan Brown

According to the ACT High School Profile Composite for Illinois, 29% of the Graduating Class of 1985 reported that they had problems with writing, and 34% of them reported that they had problems with reading. As alarming as these statistics are, they did not really tell me anything that I, or most other English teachers, for that matter, did not already know: that we have been graduating far too many students who are not competent in English. Until last year, this knowledge had been a nagging source of frustration for me. Like most over-burdened English teachers, I simply did not have the time to provide these individuals with the personalized instruction that they needed. However, the turning point came two years ago when I asked myself, "What do colleges do with these students?" The answer to that question is three-fold:

1. Place them in remedial English courses.
2. Send them to the writing center.
3. Flunk them.

Since our Basic English courses were not totally successful, and flunking students on a grand scale was out of the question, I decided to take the step in the Fall of 1984 that only a handful of desperate English teachers have taken: to institute a writing center. Even though the writing center at Griffin High

CS209659

School in Springfield, Illinois is in only its second year of[2] existence, the results that I have seen in my own students' papers and the comments that I have heard from students, parents, teachers and the principal have convinced me that the writing center is a viable way of combating the literacy crisis in our high schools.

Loosely defined, a writing center is a tutoring service consisting of a director, tutors and tutees. Such a definition is flexible enough to accommodate a variety of settings. In addition, a broad definition of the writing center affords the director the freedom to negotiate; in other words, the director can embellish a broad definition in any way he sees fit when approaching the English Department or an administrator about the feasibility of instituting a writing center.

Before deciding whether or not it would be feasible to start a writing center, the director should consider who would benefit and exactly what these benefits are. First of all, the director probably benefits the least from this venture, at least as far as tangible benefits are concerned. I am paid as much as as the year book sponsor, which averages out to approximately one dollar per day. The intangible benefits, in my opinion, more than make up for the paltry salary that I receive. The prospective director should consider negotiating for side benefits in addition to his salary, such as exchanging one class for one hour of tutoring per day. However, the most important benefit for the director is, quite simply, peace of mind. Now, I can talk to parents

during conferences and honestly tell them that there is hope for[3] their child because I now have the time and the means to help them.

The second beneficiary of the writing center is the teachers. The writing center does what they do not have the time to do: explain the red marks on the papers on a one-to-one basis. We are always the busiest after a teacher has handed back papers with "See the W.C." written across the top of the papers with the lowest grades. In the ideal tutor-teacher relationship, such as the one we have at Griffin, the teacher feels that he or she is assisted, not replaced, by the writing center.

One might also add that the school itself benefits from having a writing center. High school writing centers are still fairly rare, so any school that does have one is going to stand out. This is especially important to private schools like mine that must recruit students.

Needless to say, the primary beneficiaries are the students. It has been my experience that most students who visit the writing center do improve their grades as well as their writing skills. Besides improving their grades, visiting the writing center also changes students' attitudes toward teachers and toward English itself. Students often hate what they don't understand, and they transfer this hatred to the instructors who try to give them this knowledge. Not only has my popularity with my students increased steadily over the past year, but my students also do not complain as much when I assign papers.

If an awareness of the benefits has sufficiently motivated an instructor to start a writing center, he should first conduct

a feasibility study to determine whether or not the school actually needs a writing center. In a sense, the processes of conducting a feasibility study and of promoting the center are interrelated. While the director is trying to "sell" the writing center concept to teachers or administrators, he may encounter objections to the center that had not occurred to him before. It goes without saying that a writing center certainly is not feasible if it does not have the backing of the faculty and the principal.

The director must prove to himself first, and then to the faculty and the administration, that the situation at the school warrants the founding of a tutoring service. The director's initial reason for starting a writing center comes from his own classroom experience. It finally dawned on me after ten years of teaching writing that my red marks and comments were having little or no effect, since the same students kept making the same mistakes week after week. The counseling center can also help the director decide whether or not a writing center is feasible. Achievement test scores (e.g., PSAT, NMSQT, etc.) and interviews with the counselors can indicate to the director whether or not his suspicions regarding the literacy situation at his school were well-founded.

After convincing himself, the director should try to convince the English faculty that a center would benefit the school. However, before approaching the faculty at large, the director should first secure the support of the English Department. Because of the fact that in most high schools, most of the papers

written by students are assigned by English teachers, the director needs the full support of the English Department if there are to be any students referred to the writing center. Probably the easiest way to alienate one's colleagues is by securing the principal's approval without approaching the English Department first. When people feel that they have had something "shoved down their throats," it takes a long time for the resentment to fade away.

Of course, convincing the principal of the writing center's worth requires a much different approach. While it is advisable to speak to the principal about such matters as achievement test scores, the director must be sure to concentrate on the issue that is the major concern of most principals: money. The high school writing center is relatively inexpensive to operate because, unlike college tutors, most high school tutors are not paid. In fact, the only major obstacle that a principal might foresee would be scheduling. The four 25 minute homeroom periods following the lunch periods in my school are ideally suited to this type of operation, so I had no trouble obtaining the principal's blessing.

Having received the "green light" from the faculty and the principal, the director can begin forming his writing center. Since many high school English Departments have barely enough money to cover even the cost of mimeographing or photocopying, the director should be aware of the bare necessities that a writing center must have in order to function properly. First of all, the director needs a room. The ideal writing center would

contain plush carpets, separate rooms for tutoring, an office[6] for the director, pictures on the walls, plants on the desk and Muzak on the radio. Actually, any room will do. I use my classroom because it is available during tutoring hours. A large room is not recommended, at least in the first year of the center's existence, because of the temptation to fill the room with more tutees than the center can accommodate or with more equipment than the center can afford.

Just as the director should be careful not to choose a room with too much space, he should also be aware of the danger of signing on too many tutors. If a director selected a large number of tutors for a period during which few students are referred, the director may find himself conducting a study hall instead of a writing center. The best course of action to take is to start with a small staff which can be increased if the need arises.

Candidates for tutors should probably begin in the obvious places. The National Honor Society, for example, probably contains many students who are at least academically qualified to tutor in English. In addition, the counseling department could possibly provide the director with the names of students who did well in English but whose G.P.A. was not high enough for them to be inducted into the National Honor Society. Since it takes more than simply proficiency in English to qualify a student as a tutor, I usually ask the instructors of honors classes to recommend students that they feel have the type of personality that

it takes to be a tutor.

When interviewing tutors, the director not only has to determine if the prospective tutors are qualified or even interested in being tutors, but he will probably have to persuade them to be tutors. Monetary compensation for tutors is probably out of the question because of limited budgets, so the director must offer to pay them in other ways:

1. First of all, the director can promise to write recommendations for college, scholarships, etc. In the past year, I have written over a dozen recommendations, in one case, several for one tutor.
2. Prospective tutors also might be lured by the promise of extra study time. High school writing centers are no different than college writing centers in that there will be dry spells between writing assignments when teachers will not be referring students to the center. Most tutors are grade conscious, and most grade conscious students cannot find enough hours in the day to study. Therefore, most prospective tutors will work in the writing center so that they can have a place to study that is quieter than most study halls or home rooms. My tutors also have more freedom in the writing than they do in study halls because I let them study together when nobody is in the center.
3. As trite as it may sound, the opportunity to help their fellow man may also attract some students to tutoring. Naturally, this desire must be present in a tutor to a certain extent in order for him or her to perform well.

Although many directors wish that it were not so, a writing center cannot function without forms. Forms are, unquestionably,

a necessary evil. They are evil because the director must take[8] time that could be used for tutoring or for writing lesson plans to fill them out. On the other hand, there are enough reasons to justify filling them out that any experienced director will admit that forms are undeniably necessary:

1. First of all, the director should keep a record of each student's visits, including what went on and the date of the visit. This could prove useful to counselors and to parents during parent-teacher conferences (Figure 1).
2. The director should also have referral forms for the instructors. I give them only to English instructors because they are the ones who can really pinpoint each student's problems (Figure 2).
3. The director should also tell the referring instructor what went on during the tutoring session. Not only do they deserve to know about the visit, but they also need to know if the student showed up. If there is no communication between the center and the instructors, it is likely that the instructors will lose interest and will stop sending their students (Figure 3).
4. The director also should keep track of each day's appointments to avoid booking more students than can be tutored in one period (Figure 4).
5. The director should resort to these records at the end of each semester when making up the semester report that is presented to the principal. Besides including the number of students who used the center as a means of justifying the center's existence, the director should also break that number down by class and by instructor so that efforts can be made to persuade those instructors to send their students.

Since many of the students who visit the writing center need as much help with grammar as they do with composition, it is imperative that the director have a good collection of exercises on hand. The director has the option of making a series of hand-outs, photo-copying exercises from textbooks, or using the textbooks themselves. In my writing center, students study grammar primarily by means of photo-copied exercises because I do not have the time to make as many hand-outs as I would like.

Finally, one should not forget the "little things" which allow the center to operate smoothly. Under the heading of "nitty gritty" are items which any writing instructor would probably already have in the classroom. Ironically, many students who are referred to the Griffin Writing Center arrive unprepared to write. Therefore, I try to keep my center as well stocked with pencils and scratch paper as I can.

Of course, equipping a writing center with the most qualified tutors and the finest hardware is futile if the students and instructors do not know about the center. Therefore, it goes without saying that publicizing the writing center should be one of the director's main priorities. Fortunately, one need not cut back on the other necessitites in order to conduct a publicity campaign. Unlike businesses which budget hundreds of thousands of dollars for publicity, the high school writing center can publicize itself at little or no expense.

I start my publicity campaign by talking to the faculty during our first meeting. It is important to start here because in the beginning, anyway, most of the tutees are referred by

the instructors. At this meeting, I try to inform the faculty-[10] at large of our services and our hours and to disspell any illusions that they might have about the center. If the faculty perceives the writing center to be a cheating service, they certainly won't be referring any students.

After selling the idea to the faculty, I then try to sell the concept to the students. I talk it up in all of my classes, and so do all of the other English teachers, but I do not stop there. When the center first opened, I arranged to have myself interviewed for the school newspaper, and I also have a small ad that runs in every issue, free of charge. I even had an art student create an eye-catching poster for me that is prominently displayed in the cafeteria.

Despite all of the director's efforts, the best form of P.R. is word of mouth. If the students who visit the center improve their skills and their grades, they will tell their friends, and the director will discover toward the middle of the school year that the center does not have to depend solely on teachers to send their students because the students will send themselves.

Besides arming himself with the knowledge of what will ensure the success of the fledgling writing center, the director must also be aware of what will guarantee the failure of the center. Writing centers are like all other human enterprises in that anything that can go wrong probably will. However, there are four potential problems that can be avoided if the director knows about them ahead of time.

First of all, the director should not sign on too many[11] tutors. Last year, I had three tutors scheduled during the senior homeroom period. Fewer seniors attend the center than any other class; consequently, these boys had nothing to do but sit and talk. Eventually, they persuaded me to allow their friends to come in periodically. Before I knew it, I had what constituted a class the size of the average homeroom. In addition, when a senior did come in for tutoring, the tutors were too busy to help him.

Secondly, the director should not define the center too narrowly. Unfortunately, remedial students are not the only ones with writing problems; in fact, it is not uncommon for one of my Advanced Placement students to visit the center with a writing problem. Therefore, the director must be careful not to stigmatize the center as a place where only the "dumb" students go.

Thirdly, the director should not help students too much. This is where tutor training comes in. During the first week of school before teachers have begun assigning papers, I usually put my tutors through role playing exercises so that they can learn where helping stops and cheating begins. It is a fact that it is sometimes easier to solve a student's problem for him instead of having him solve it himself. After all, this is what the tutors should be trying to do: to show students how they can become their own editors.

Finally, the director must try not to alienate the referring faculty. A director must bend with the wind; that is,

he must teach the tutees the way the referring instructors wish[12] them to be taught. Last year, I created a problem because I did not have the foresight to find out what each teacher wanted me to do. This particular English teacher accused me of "running interference" for her students because they were coming in to see me instead of asking her questions before or after school, as she had instructed them to.

The plan that has been presented in this paper is nothing more than a "bare-bones" design. Of course, after the writing center has become firmly established, the director could embellish the room with such luxuries as posters, plants, carpeting, Muzak, etc. However, until that day arrives when students, faculty and administrators alike agree that the writing center is indispensable, the director would be best advised to concentrate on serving the students in the most efficient way possible.

Figure 1

STUDENT RECORD SHEET

Student's Name _____

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Date _____ Help Received:

Figure 2

Referral Form
Griffin Writing Center

Name of Student _____

Referring Instructor _____

Course _____ Department _____

TO THE STUDENT:

Present this form to a tutor in the Writing Center. The tutor will assist you according to the directions indicated below. Your instructor will be informed of your visit.

TO THE TUTOR

This student needs instruction in the following area(s):

Grammar and Mechanics

___ punctuation
___ sentence fragment
___ pronoun reference
___ spelling
___ subject/verb agreement
___ comma splice and/or fused sentence
___ possessives
___ misplaced modifiers
___ subordination
___ faulty diction
___ capitalization
___ other _____

Organization and Development

___ thesis
___ paragraph development
___ transitions
___ sentence structure
___ sentence variety
___ other _____

Referring Instructor's Comments:

Date

_____

Figure 3

To The Instructor _____

Your student, _____, came to the writing center on _____ and received help with:

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To The Instructor _____

Your student, _____, came to the writing center on _____ and received help with:

Alan Brown

To The Instructor _____

Your student, _____, came to the writing center on _____ and received help with:

Figure 4

APPOINTMENTS

Date	Student	Inst.	Class	Student	Inst.	Class	Student	Inst.	Class
4a									
4b									
5a									
5b									
4a									
4b									
5a									
5b									
4a									
4b									
5a									
5b									
4a									
4b									
5a									
5b									
4a									
4b									
5a									
5b									